

Learning for work and working to learn: Challenges within a changing UK higher education system*

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Abstract: Higher education in the United Kingdom is currently undergoing major changes. In the foreseeable future, it will also undergo further change. The nature of these changes can be attributed to several key areas—government demand for change, industry demand for change and student demand for change. The UK, like many other major economies and not for the first time in recent history, is having to face the implications of severe skills shortages in its workforce, coupled with the increasing competitiveness of more globalised workforces and workplaces. A recent major government report has set out the country's skills agenda until 2020 and UK higher education is starting to wrestle with the implications of these changes, some of which challenge the traditional preserves of university education. This paper will focus on the implications of these skills shortages and the impact that is having on UK higher education. In particular, reference will be made to the impact of the new 2 years vocational Foundation Degrees, to the shift from supply-led to demand-led higher education, the increasing integration and tensions of work-based learning and to the accreditation of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) within an academic framework. This paper presents one story of the growing and changing relationship between higher education and industry.

Key words: United Kingdom; higher education; changes; Foundation Degrees

1. Introduction

The year of 2007, we are currently living in an era of very rapid change, arguably the most rapid change ever seen. In most countries of the world, the development of internet and related technologies is responsible for changing the ways in which we work, learn, relax, socialize and above all, communicate. The advances in the application of Web 2.0 technologies, particularly in social networking, will probably mark out the end of 2007 from the start of it. In the UK, as elsewhere, we are caught firmly in the middle of this technological evolution. It impacts directly not only on our social interaction, but also on our education systems and on our workforce. Increasingly advanced technologies have the power to solve problems, but they also create and compound others. Above all, they ensure that we must acknowledge and harness change.

As elsewhere in the world, higher education in the United Kingdom is itself in the middle of an unprecedented era of change, with undoubtedly more to follow. Change of the higher education system is already demanded by or evolving from widening access and participation, including decline in public funding, the

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changing nature of knowledge transfer, perceived national and international skills shortages, changing delivery modes and places for learning, involvement of employers, the ideals of learner “employability” (however that may be defined) and educational provision attempting to support economic competitiveness in the increasingly international and moving graduate labour market. Students themselves are forcing change—more students want and need to study near home rather than undertake higher education as a residential experience; more students want or need to work while they learn; more students want to go back into higher education after a lengthy break. Students and industry alike have increasing needs of higher education to be related directly to employment, as well as to provide those transferable skills that will allow them to move flexibly from one work context to another. Traditional patterns of higher education do not accommodate the growing percentage of part-time and non-traditional learners, so there has increasingly to be adaptation and change in order just to keep up.

The UK is also part of the expanding European economics and educational areas, with its growing network of European qualifications, many, particularly postgraduate programmes, taught in English. UK graduates of the very near future will have to compete with graduates from other European countries who not only are bi- or tri-lingual, but now in addition have a postgraduate qualification using English as a medium. Additionally UK graduates will have to compete with the rapidly expanding output of high-calibre graduates from China, India and elsewhere. Rather than just studying for academic interest, students now need to prepare for an increasingly cut-throat and international world of work and to plan for career paths that may well be multi-faceted during their lifetimes.

However, the UK has identified significant and growing skills gaps, a problem which in 2007 is certainly not new, but is increasingly at the forefront of government and industry thinking. In December 2006, the *Leitch Review of Skills* was published and will inform the way further and higher education needs to work together with industry towards goals set for the year 2020. The implications of the Leitch report, which are still in the relatively early throes of being digested by the higher education community, may be far-reaching for higher education. They challenge the ways universities work in some respects, and certainly challenge the traditional role of universities in developing, validating and delivering their own programmes with little recourse to external bodies—certain professional bodies excepted—in fact, the ownership of an autonomous process is effectively challenged.

One of the recent responses to address the skills gaps has been the introduction of Foundation Degrees. Foundation Degrees were launched in 2000, the first new type of Higher Education Qualification in the UK for twenty-five years. These two years vocationally-based programmes, equivalent to the first two years of an undergraduate programme in England¹, have certain key characteristics that differentiate them from traditional undergraduate degrees or from the long standing Higher National Qualifications—involvement of employers/employer organisations in the design, delivery, assessment and review of the programmes; provision of designated progression onto the third year of an undergraduate programme; inclusion of and underpinning by work-based learning.

2007 is therefore an era of change, of addressing the needs of skills shortages, industry demands, new types of higher education learners and increasing European and international competition. Higher education and industry must work more closely together for the future—how is this partnership developing and what of the future in the UK?

¹ 240 UK academic credits.

2. Discussion

“University sector warned...the Government this week signaled a cultural revolution in higher education as it unveiled its plans for reskilling the nation”

(*Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 20th 2007)

“There is nothing you can learn in the workplace that you cannot learn in the classroom...is there?”²

(*University Manager*, July 2007)

It is said by government and industry alike that we have considerable and growing skills gaps in the UK and unless we address this problem, we are heading for major problems by the year 2020. This position is of course not unique to the UK and other countries are suffering from similar problems. What is the role of higher education in this context? What is the role of industry? What is the dividing line between higher level skills training and higher level education? Are our students learning to work or are they now working to learn? Do we, the Higher Education Sector have a problem and if yes, the major question is what we are doing or going to do about it.

Excepted technological advances, things are rarely new in education, rather they tend to be cyclical. There are parallels between the early 1980s and now in terms of government reaction to these perceived skills gaps in the workforce and to declining output of graduates from vital subject areas. However, in 2007, the debate has shifted to a more global platform with the challenges of a rapidly growing supply of graduates from emerging mass higher education nations such as India and China. As English has now become a dominant language in world commerce and industry, so a ready supply of European and other graduates with excellent English language skills also looks set to challenge and compete for graduate and non-graduate jobs in the UK. The challenges for us today are therefore to ensure that the skills gaps in the UK are being addressed for the future, to ensure that higher education is playing its part with industry partners, and to ensure that present and future graduates are as employable as possible—that they have the necessary employability traits as well as levels of academic learning.

In December 2006, the long-awaited *Leitch Review of Skills* was published, and this has some major implications for UK higher education. Arguably the greatest of these is for higher education to respond to a call to change from its traditional position of developing supply-side programmes to that of developing *demand-led* provision. Demand-led provision has considerable challenges for higher education—absolute control of curriculum design, delivery and assessment would no longer be the absolute preserve of “the academy”—industry and business would be in the vanguard of new higher education developments. Collaboration would be imperative, and collaboration in an area which universities would traditionally regard as their domain.

The traditional role of the university sector, to intake and educate an elite section of the population has been eroding since 1980 when Ulrich Teichler, et al (1980) suggested the advantages that might be attached to a limited “reputational range” in university provision. The drive for lifelong learning and widening participation began in earnest later in the 1980s, and by the mid 1990s, it was identified that there was a pressing need to address an already growing skills gap at para-professional/higher technical level. The “widening participation agenda” then became one of the mainstays of the education policy for the New Labour government from 1997 as did the beginnings of the formalising of the relationship between industry and the universities. In the *New Labour Manifesto* written for the General Election of 1997, the aspirations for the new University for Industry are set out:

Our new University for Industry, collaborating with the Open University, will bring new opportunities to adults

² Anonymous.

seeking to develop their potential. This will bring government, industry and education together to create a new resource whose remit will be to use new technology to enhance skills and education. The University for Industry will be a public/private partnership, commissioning software and developing the links to extend lifelong learning.

The 1997 manifesto also identified other initiatives to promote a lifelong learning agenda:

Employers have the primary responsibility for training their workforces in job-related skills. But individuals should be given the power to invest in training. We will invest public money for training in Individual Learning Accounts which individuals—for example women returning to the labour force—can then use to gain the skills they want.

By 2003, widening participation had become firmly established as a main plank of the New Labour Higher Education Agenda, with a manifesto target to attain 50 per cent participation by those aged 18-30 by 2010. This agenda, in isolation, may be separated from the discussion about the linkages between industry and higher education, but looking at the broader picture, it is an integral and growing part. In 2007, for example, we are not so much discussing *lifelong* learning as *lifewide* learning. In such a context, the two linkages cannot be separated.

As a response to these dual strands, Foundation Degrees, the first new type of higher education for a quarter of a century, were launched in 2000, bringing together several of agendas:

The main thing that makes Foundation Degrees of wider interest than simply a new form of employment focused provision is that they are potentially groundbreaking in terms of their conception and delivery. They are also an ongoing experiment in educational re-engineering since they are implicated in a wide range of government policy agendas...it is this that makes them an exemplary case for research... (Beaney, 2006, p. 11)

These two years vocationally-based programmes have certain key characteristics that differentiate them from traditional undergraduate degrees or from the long standing Higher National Qualifications—involvement of employers/employer organisations in the design, delivery, assessment and review of the programmes; designated progression onto the third year of an undergraduate programme; and inclusion of work-based learning. In 2001-2002, some 4,000 students embarked upon the new qualifications and by 2006-2007, 83 universities and 255 Further Education colleges were delivering Foundation Degrees to over 61,000³ learners and this number is set to rise steeply during 2007-2009.

Foundation Degrees are closely linked to Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). The UK Business Sector is now divided into a network of 25 SSCs, employer-led, independent organizations coming together under the global title of skills for business and overseen by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). SSCs currently cover about 85% of the UK workforce. Each SSC was tasked with a series of clear objectives including the development of Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), to be developed jointly with sectoral employers, trade associations, professional and employer bodies plus education and training providers. It was hoped that these SSAs would fundamentally alter the way skills are identified, delivered and developed. SSAs therefore identify skills gaps and weaknesses, assess and map out exactly what skills employers need their workforce to have and how these skills will be supplied—both now and in the future.

Four of the Sector Skills Councils development areas are fundamental to the growth and development of Foundation Degrees—the Workforce Development Plan, the Foundation Degree Framework, the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) and opportunities for apprenticeships. This has brought about a number of challenges for higher education, challenges that are already likely to be symptomatic of things to come. That Foundation Degrees are so closely linked with the skills and workforce development agenda, and that this agenda

³ Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England. *Hefce News*, January 23rd, 2007.

is to a very large extent being steered by bodies and factors external to the world of universities, is welcomed by some and treated with grave misgiving by others. The defining of the content of an academic programme is traditionally the preserve of academe, although increasingly linked to the requirements of professional bodies. The annexing of National Occupational Standards, well-accepted by medical practitioners and academics, is not the natural domain of all other academic faculties. NOSs are being regarded in some quarters as being an unwelcome extension of the “tick-box mentality”, as it has widely been described, of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) into the academic lecture hall.

Another of the areas the SSCs are tasked with has been the development of apprenticeships and apprentice education. The importance of this has been raised still further in the *Leitch Review of Skills*, with a call for the number of apprenticeships to reach 500,000 by 2020. Foundation Degrees have been identified as a natural progression for apprentices achieving a Level 3 qualification on the National Qualifications Framework to progress into higher education. Level 3 apprentices divide their time between their respective workplaces and a local college of further education. Research into numbers progressing locally was needed to be able to compare the data against the national benchmark. Trevor Sinclair’s research study for AimHigher, released in February 2007, produced the findings that within the county of Bedfordshire at best 0.01% apprentices had progressed onto any form of higher education. This data was then followed up by interviewing cohorts of apprentices themselves, further education college providers and employers. Of these three sets of people, the apprentices turned out to be very keen but ill-informed of their options, the employers were reluctant but eventually willing to enter into dialogue and the particular college personnel involved was disinterested, higher education being regarded as financially outside of their core markets. We now have to engage with the breaking of this cycle—it is seriously damaging for future industry/higher education developments.

The development of Foundation Degree Frameworks is perhaps the least contentious area. Higher educational professionals are long used to working within the confines of a tight quality assurance system and in the UK, within the Academic Infrastructure.⁴ However, even the Foundation Degree Frameworks provide challenge to some, particularly where they specify workforce development and not recognisably academic content. Another area of challenge within Foundation Degrees is their exact context. They are designated as work-based qualifications, or rather, qualifications to be underpinned by work-based learning. This raises some immediate questions. Firstly, what do we really understand by the term “work-based learning”? A swift glance through programme specifications of Foundation Degrees from different institutions reveals a perhaps bewildering array of approaches and definitions. The well-worn work/learning definition debate seems to be a constant plague—what are the differences between work experience, work shadowing, work placement, work-related learning, workplace learning, experiential learning, informal learning, work-contextualised, and work-based learning? Barriers in the corridors of academe still have yet to be broken down to begin to acknowledge fully that equal but different learning could and does occur outside the classroom. The acknowledgement that higher level learning can occur in the workplace and that employers could be involved in the processes of higher education is still in the summer of 2007 a radical step for some, although a well-worn trail for others. The benefits of flexibility and accessibility of provision are in practice confounded by this uncertainty of definition, something which may be hotly debated at length within universities and at academic conferences, and which in itself may be very interesting, is of little

⁴ The Academic Infrastructure has recently been updated to include a discrete Foundation Degree benchmark statement (October 2004) and the Code of Practice Section 9: Placement learning is being updated currently (summer 2007) to take account of the new approaches to work-based learning now very prevalent in higher education.

comfort when confronted with this in real life. Trying to bring together employers, Further Education Partners and university academics, “A large proportion of the initial skill-deficiencies reported by employers relate to skills and knowledge that are best acquired on the job. So it is important to increase the opportunities for students to gain experience of working in businesses” (Lambert, 2003, p. 111).

Work-based learning is often described as being still in its infancy, a lengthy infancy given that its parents grew up some two decades ago and with ancestry being traceable still further back:

The beginnings of work-based learning for academic credit in the UK is set in the context of rapid change in the social and economic and hence educational life of the country during the 1980s...the government was in a somewhat panicky frame of mind over the economy, and over the presumed inadequate skill and knowledge levels of the workforce in general. At the same time, it was putting great effort into expanding higher education while urging companies and higher education to be more active together through partnerships, collaboration, widening access and opening previously impenetrable boundaries. (Boud & Solomon, 2003)

It still seems that the challenges that work-based learning brings in terms of a learner-centred approach to curriculum—a curriculum which is determined by what the students may wish or are able to negotiate to learn and not what is set for them to learn—may still be a step too far for some.

At the University of Bedfordshire, we carried out some detailed research into our own Foundation Degree provision during 2006-2007 and have subsequently been able to compare this with some other local/regionalized studies and an emerging national picture from Foundation Degree Forward. It seems that Foundation Degrees in reality come in several different wrappings. There are some excellent examples of Foundation Degrees having been developed with large national or international employers, perhaps for the use of their own staff. Based firmly with the workplace, and with a link to a local HE provider, they have been developed with work-based learning firmly at their core, they are relevant to the context of the particular employer/employment sector and are thriving. Examples of this would include those Foundation Degrees developed for Rolls-Royce, JCB, Glaxo-Wellcome, Boots Opticians, Tesco, the Professional Golf Association (PGA) and TUI.

Others, developed by providers but with the true engagement of employers, are also thriving, albeit the context may be a little different. The most successful examples of these would probably involve part-time provision and may be located within the public sector. Notable examples would be those Foundation Degrees developed for Classroom Assistants, Early Years Practitioners, National Health Service Assistant Practitioners Care Managers, the Police Service, the London Ambulance Service, the Merchant Navy, the Army and so on. These are sectors in which good liaison has been maintained between a range of parties—universities, colleges, Sector Skills Councils, Foundation Degree Forward and the various employer bodies. Areas that may be more challenging to the traditional university sector include the more specialist vocational areas, such as Foundation Degrees developed in Beauty Therapy, Specialist Make-up Design, Complementary Therapy or Specialised Vocational Management Areas.

To place any form of workplace learning at the heart of a higher education programme it must first be recognised that the learning gained in the workplace may be different to learning in the classroom, but it is not inferior—different but equal. In terms of accepting extended periods of placement as part of a sandwich course, or similar, this seems to be little problem and has been widely used for a long time as a valuable complementary experience, “students generally value the work placement experience, even if negative, and see it as complementary, but different to their learning at university” (Morón-García & Powell, 2007).

However, work placements, even a year’s sandwich placement, often do not contribute proportionately in

terms of credit. They are often equivalent to only one module and therefore do not greatly challenge the balance of the traditional programme. As one student from a traditional UK university commented recently:

I studied for a degree in Business Management which was a four-years degree including a sandwich year that I spent in a financial institution. I shut my text book at page 253 at the end of year 2 and opened it again on page 254 at the start of year 4. No real mention was ever made of the experiences I had gained in the middle.

3. Conclusions

We cannot see into the future, which is perhaps to be welcomed. However, what is without doubt true is that a paper such as this which is being written towards the end of 2007 will surely be out of date in some respects by the start of 2008, such is the speed of development of new internet technologies. Higher education, in the UK as elsewhere, is not similarly renowned for its speed of change, and in many respects, it is perhaps at its most comfortable root in the past. Change itself is of course nothing new to higher education but it must now embrace the demands for change in respect of workforce education and skills for the foreseeable future, not just purely academic development. This is not perhaps such a comfortable position—change might bring about challenges to the autonomy of universities to determine content, place and mode of delivery and staffing. It might even, in the very near future, challenge the sole preserve of the universities to award degrees. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland it is likely that by the end of 2008 some colleges of further education may have been granted their own Foundation Degree awarding powers. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* headline⁵ of September 28th runs private college to award degrees, highlighting the first time degree awarding powers have been awarded to a private, profit making company, BPP College. It is also reported that this has been described as an “astonishing, monumental decision” by the Privy Council.

It is further possible that during 2008 more large industrial concerns may have developed their own Foundation Degrees and degrees, aside from conventional university input. More employers may be dictating or directing the content and delivery of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) based awards. UK Higher Education Institutions must also consider their position with respect to demands for change at home and within the context of Europe and beyond. At the same time, there is much good practice in UK universities and other Higher Education Institutions and it would be disadvantageous to lose sight of that in the clamour to change.

Higher education and industry must continue and expand their working relationship if even a small proportion of the required developments are to come about. It seems that some of these changes will be forced by government. Government undergraduate funding may for example become more focused on subject areas where there is proven vocational need or industry demand. Government funding policy is also likely to change in respect of part-time students, again increasing the importance of the link between industry and higher education. Provision of small chunks of higher education will also become more prevalent. Again, this is nothing new and many HEIs provide admirable industry-linked CPD programme. There is likely to be marked expansion here, especially with reference to the accrediting of existing workplace CPD programme within a higher education framework. There are other matters that higher education needs to address comprehensively and urgently if a greater impact is to be made to provide effective demand-led higher education to meet the needs of employers. Higher education has to be made more accessible in terms of size of offering—smaller *chunks* of higher education have to be offered, higher level programme on specific topics that can be delivered quickly in short, sharp bursts

⁵ Baty, P. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. September 28th 2007, No. 1,813, p. 1.

thus not prolonging programmes over 2-3 years. However, for others, there is some feeling that this challenges the preserve of the “complete” higher education programme. Higher education may also have to learn to analyse and work with skills gaps and weaknesses in a different way, and not leave this activity to the preserve of employers’ organizations.

Higher education across the board also has to get to grips with recognising and embedding the growing raft of National Occupational Standards and acknowledging that competencies are not merely the preserve of lower level vocational programmes. In addition, effective and simple processes for AP(E)L have to be used more widely and more effectively to allow people already in the workplace to access higher education which perhaps they need but do not have the traditional entry requirements to fulfil.

There are certainly challenges and opportunities here to meet the identified needs of students, of employers and of UK and European agendas. The Secretary of State for Education called for “radical changes in the provision of higher education”⁶. We have the opportunity for joined-up thinking to make and embed those radical changes. We have the script in our hands but in pieces: we now need to join up those pieces so that we do engage meaningfully with employers, incorporate genuine work-based learning opportunities, encourage enlightened and relevant Personal Development Planning activities, provide higher education in smaller and more manageable chunks and above all, provide first class and cohesive higher learning provision for all our students. Thus UK will start to make the shift from supply-side to demand-led provision that the government and industry now requires it to do.

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⁶ Grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council, February 2006.